

Master Plan Working Group

c/o Newark Community Development Network
569 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard ■ Newark, New Jersey 07102
(973) 523-8310 ■ (973) 623-8344 (Fax)

December 2000

Councilman Cory Booker
City Hall
920 Broad Street, Room 304
Newark, NJ 07102

Dear Councilman Booker:

I am writing on behalf of the Master Plan Working Group. We'd like to clearly state the reasons for our continued opposition to the ordinance that will allow the development of 25-foot lots without approval from the Central Planning Board. This ordinance was apparently discussed during a special conference meeting on November 21, 2000, with limited opportunities for concerned parties to speak.

The following points reiterate our position that the implications of such an ordinance can be potentially harmful to residents' quality of life:

1. Residents need to have the opportunity to address economic development and planning issues that impact them, particularly those that impact their specific street and/or block. Development on small, isolated lots actually increases the need to notify residents and provide residents an opportunity to comment. Such development directly affects the quality of life for residents on that street. Resident attendance and comment at Central Planning Board meetings and other forums have impacted greatly on the design of projects to improve its "neighbor-friendliness" (i.e. exact project dimensions, set-backs, etc.).
2. Developers have consistently complained that it takes too long to get scheduled onto the Central Planning Board agenda (6 months), and that their cases are not always heard on the night they are scheduled, which, of course, results in added costs for them. These types of problems should be addressed, but not by making it impossible for residents to articulate their opinions about the developments on their block.
3. While this ordinance would indeed be beneficial for portions of the city that wish to encourage development, it is certainly harmful to other areas that are experiencing rapid, unplanned over-development. In areas that are experiencing over-development, the existence of even a few lots of this width could be critical in efforts to, for example, increase open space availability to the community. These lots should not be developed now without a thorough assessment of how they might be acquired and used to increase recreational, open space and other opportunities. With additional planning, local input and thoughtful deliberation, solutions could be designed that encourage the building of homes in areas that need it and prevent it in those that have need for other types of development (i.e. recreational space and schools). When an ordinance is too sweeping, what seems to be a solution for one neighborhood may, in fact, exacerbate a problem in another.
4. The process by which this ordinance was developed was flawed in the following ways:
 - There was no information or study presented to support the need for this ordinance (e.g. number of lots affected, location of these lots, etc.). There was no analysis of the number of lots.
 - Residents, even those in groups that have been quite active in planning issues throughout the city during the past few years, such as our Master Plan Working Group, had no opportunity to participate in discussions of this ordinance before it appeared for the second reading and final passage.

- Particularly, discussing the ordinance in a room filled with developers cannot be a substitute for careful thought, research and analysis. A "face-off" between groups with differing agendas is very different from leadership in an effort to build consensus among various groups, and clearly much less productive.
- No one in any independent professional planning capacity was present for the discussion, or has had an opportunity to review this ordinance and present testimony to the City Council.

5. The Master Plan Working Group has repeatedly encouraged the city to establish a planning process that prioritizes residents' quality of life and partners with existing residents to specifically define what that process would look like. This ordinance moves in the *opposite* direction – promoting rapid, random development, without planning. It encourages building without analysis of the quality of housing being proposed; without addressing community impact; without knowing how many homes and people are affected; and whether the infrastructure (i.e. schools, municipal services, etc.) exists to support this increased population. It encourages housing, while no land is reserved for open space or schools development. More importantly, even residents who live next door to a potential site will have no opportunity to object or support a particular project.
6. The City Council, in its wisdom, increased the minimum lot width and area just over four years ago from 25 feet wide to 35 feet, and 2,500s.f. to 3,500s.f. to reduce density. What has changed, other than developers' demands and pressure to accommodate their needs? Quality of life for Newark residents should undoubtedly supersede the need for developers to squeeze every dollar out of each development project. In a recent study, New Jersey has more people per square mile than Japan and several other highly-populated countries. Why should we, in Newark, continue to add to that statistic?

For these reasons, we ask that you, please, vote against the passage of this particular ordinance. Thank you so very much for your consideration of our request.

Respectfully,

SanDonna L. Bryant
Newark Community Development Network